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1957

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Simply Heavenly"

"Simply Heavenly" opened off Broadway on May 21, 1957, at the 85th Street Playhouse. It re-opened on Broadway at the Playhouse Theatre on August 20, 1957. Please note that some of the following reviews are of the later date and some of the original opening.

DAILY NEWS

August 21, 1957

'Simply Heavenly' an Affectionate And Humorous Harlem Vignette

By JOHN CHAPMAN

I think it is too modest of the Playhouse Theatre management to bill Langston Hughes' "Simply Heavenly" as "a new musical folk comedy." It is a comedy, and an ingratiating one, and let's dispense with the "folk" part of it. It's about the people of Harlem as they are seen by Hughes' keen eyes and heard by his acute ears. It is done with affection, humor and honesty, and if it's just a "folk" comedy, so was "Life With Father."

"Simply Heavenly" is a light and funny string of sketches with two or three songs by David Martin added to provide a bit of bounce. Its origin is a series of columns which Hughes, a poet as well as a reporter, has written over several years for the Chicago Defender. Its stage origin was an off-Broadway production which was moved last evening to the handier neighborhood of W. 48th St. Its effect in the theatre is warming but not overwhelming; it offers affection and asks for it.

Not So Simple

Over these years, Hughes has been writing about a forthright fellow named Jess Semple, whom everybody calls Simple for short. Hughes has been meeting him in Harlem bars like Paddy's in the play . . . and listening to him. Simple is simple, perhaps, but he is no dope; he is honest and he asks no favors as he struggles with the eternal problems thrown at every man by women, the cost of living, landladies, taxes and bottles of beer. Being average, Simple is no more "folk" than anybody else, but he is funnier than most because Hughes has been taking a long look at him.

"Simply Heavenly" is not going to set Broadway afire, but it should put a small glow of warmth into Broadway's cold old heart. From short scene to short scene it exposes Jess Semple's struggles to win the girl he loves (whom he cannot win until he saves enough to buy a divorce from his first wife) and the temptations offered him by a dusky Circe named Zarita. Now and again the plot shifts to Paddy's Bar in center stage for a musical interlude.

For the Right Singer

The musical interludes are excellent, for most of them are dominated by a square-built singer named Claudia McNeil, who has the double advantage of being sure of herself and sure of Pearl Bailey. Miss McNeil's version of Miss Bailey might even be better than the original.

The plot, such as it is, involves Simple Semple and his girl friend, Joyce. These two are played most appealingly by Melvin Stewart and Marilyn Berry.

"SIMPLY HEAVENLY"

A musical folk comedy in two acts and seventeen scenes with book and lyrics by Langston Hughes, music and orchestration by David Martin; staged by Joshua Shelley; setting and lighting by Raymond Sovey; presented by Abe Enklewitz and Vincent Cerow at the Playhouse Theatre, August 20, 1957. The cast:

Simple.....Melvin Stewart
Madam Butler..Wilhelmina Gray
Boyd.....Stanley Greene
Mrs. Caddy.....Dagmar Craig
Joyce Lane.....Marilyn Berry
Hopkins.....Duke Williams
Bar Pianist.....Willie Pritchett
Mamie.....Claudia McNeil
Bodiddly.....Charles A. McRae
Character.....Allegro Kane
Melon.....John Bouie
Gitfiddle.....Brownie McGhee
Zarita.....Anna English
Arcie.....Josephine Woods
John Jasper...Charles Harrigan
Big Boy, Cop...Maxwell Glanville

Stewart, in his role, is an inarticulate poet who, when the world's cares aren't besetting him too hard, can dream the most wonderful dreams. In his best dream, he is a U. S. general in charge of a whole army of white troops from Mississippi. In his job he handles everything with tact and diplomacy, which is more than I would.

The New York Times

May 22, 1957

Theatre: A Family Entertainment

'Simply Heavenly' From Langston Hughes Book

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH Langston Hughes is a celebrated poet, don't look for the muses in "Simply Heavenly," which opened at 150 West Eighty-fifth Street last evening. He has written a family entertainment.

It derives from his folk novel of Harlem, "Simple Takes a Wife." "Simply Heavenly" does manage to get Jess Simple formally betrothed to Joyce Lane on Christmas Eve in the final scene, as the novel does in its final sketches.

But Mr. Hughes seems to have one trait in common with Jess Simple. He cannot resist a good time. Cheerfulness is always breaking in. Instead of putting together an academic comedy, Mr. Hughes has turned it into a rollicking variety show with songs written by David Martin, lyrics by the playwright and any number of topical jokes about Negro bigwigs and Negro foibles and fantasies.

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The stage is set to represent Jess' room on one side, Joyce's room on the other and Paddy's Bar smack dab in the middle. That is a sensible arrangement. Mr. Hughes ties the threads of his ironic romance in the two furnished rooms. But what interests him and the audience is the festivity in the barroom. Paddy's bar is the center of his version of Harlem life; it is the neighborhood club for husbands, wives, musicians, hussies, friends and everyone except Joyce Lane, who is a refined girl.

As a theatre piece, "Simply Heavenly" is disorderly and does less than full credit to the humorous novel from which the plot and most of the characters come. But Paddy's Bar is a hospitable haven, as Mr. Hughes is a hospitable writer; and what he has written for the bar scenes is hearty and hilarious, sweet and worldly, comic and realistic. Everything comes in pairs. For Mr. Hughes is a folk writer who is also sophisticated.

Jess Simple's fantastic dream of being the first Negro general to lead a regiment of white Mississippi soldiers into battle is very funny. But Mr. Hughes brings it down to earth with his curtain line. "That's a sick boy," one of the barroom loafers remarks sardonically as Jess goes out the door. It provokes one of the most uproarious laughs of the evening.

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The scenery, the direction and the stage work in general are sketchy. No professionalism has been squandered on the production. But the performing is thoroughly enjoyable. Melvin Stewart could hardly be better as Jess Simple. His good intentions and his weakness for revelry make a disarming combination. Marilyn Berry's good looks and good spirits make an attractive Joyce, although there was a lot more guile to the Joyce of the novel.

The bar-room cronies are wonderful. Ethel Ayler as Zarita, the notorious man-trap, Claudia McNeill, who translates a convivial drinker into a Harlem Pearl Bailey, John Bouie as a melon peddler with an irresistible line of sweet talk, Lawson Bates as the barkeep, Willie Pritchett as the pianist are good company when the joint begins to jump. As the college graduate who is a writer, Stanley Greene plays a part that is presumably Langston Hughes, author of "Simple Takes a Wife." Mr. Greene gives a pleasant, engaging performance. But he is handicapped by the fact that Mr. Hughes has underwritten himself.

Mr. Hughes loves Harlem. He loves the humor, the quarrels, the intrigues, the crises and the native shrewdness that makes life possible from day to day. He has written "Simply Heavenly" like a Harlem man. If it were a tidier show, it probably would be a good deal less enjoyable. It would seem less like something that has been improvised out of high spirits for the sake of a good time.

Daily Mirror

August 21, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'Simply Heavenly' Is Fun

Several weeks ago an all-Negro play with music, called "Simply Heavenly," opened at the 85th St. Playhouse. It drew appreciative reviews from a number of critics. But after playing to capacity for 44 performances, it had to fold because of license trouble and fire violations.

Among those who caught the show were Irving and Murray Castle, who thought it deserved a chance on the Main Stem. So they put up the do-re-mi to bring it to their Playhouse on 48th St. Tuesday night. There it received a rousing welcome from the first-nighters.

THE MUSICAL has a book by Langston Hughes, based on his tomes, "Simple Takes a Wife" and "Simple Speaks his Mind." It has to do with one Jesse B. Simple, who likes people, and, naturally, people like him. He is sort of a Harlem Elwood P. Dowd, who often gets into trouble because he can't say no to a friendly drink or gal.

Cooped up in a small boarding-house bedroom, harassed by an exacting landlady, he wants to marry a nice girl and find a comfortable apartment. But along the line he has acquired a spouse who demands that he pay one-third the cost of a divorce — $133.34, to be exact. With a gold seal on it yet, to make it legal.

Then there's the siren, Zarita, who lures him on a wild auto ride from which he lands in traction, in a hospital bed. But you know as well as we do that such an amiable and well-meaning fellow as Simple must overcome his temptations, and realize some of his dreams by the final curtain's fall.

"Simply Heavenly" is a sketchy, unpretentious folk musical that boasts several highly amusing sequences. It has an atmospheric score by David Martin. And a well-chosen cast that makes the most of its virtues, and cleverly covers its weaknesses. It gives it the works.

We were particularly delighted by a robust singing comedienne named Claudia McNeil. As Mamie, a wise and independent chick, she turns in a terrific performance. She can belt out a song with the best, and win a solid laugh with almost any line that comes her way. A real star, in our book.

Melvin Stewart etches Simple, the boy who chases and captures a bluebird, with winning simplicity and skill. Marilyn Berry is attractive as the girl of his choice. Anna English is sinuous and sultry as the femme menace. Other standouts in the cast are Stanley Greene, Josephine Woods, Duke Williams, Charles A. McRae and John Bouie.

"SIMPLY HEAVENLY" offers a pleasant evening for those willing to take it on its own terms. No masterpiece, this, but it has ingratiating characters who spell a lot of fun. The customers at the W. 48th St. Playhouse demonstrated their approval via lusty applause.

As for us, the high spot of the proceedings was the artistry of Claudia McNeil. She stopped the show every time director Joshua Shelley gave her the opportunity.

Journal-American

August 21, 1957

It's Far Easier To Score a Hit Off--Broadway

By JIM O'CONNOR

A SIMPLE LITTLE LOVE STORY, which got good notices when presented off-Broadway last Spring, tried for Broadway last night. It was a good try, but—

"Simply Heavenly," a musical folk comedy opening at the Playhouse, did not quite make it. Principally because Broadway drama standards are higher than those in a small theatre on W. 85th st. These big time standards apply to all.

The thin story line concerns the efforts of lovesick Melvin Stewart as Jess Simple to win the hand of Joyce, portrayed appealingly by Marilyn Berry. Follows a series of brief episodes in Stewart's room, in Joyce's room, but mostly in Paddy's Bar in Harlem.

Stewart is a likable young man and an accomplished actor, even when called upon to recite. His humorous bit about the Negro general leading white troops from Mississippi in World War III went over big.

Show-Stopper

Miss Berry, in a sympathetic role, has an expressive countenance and sings in a soft, sweet voice.

I rate the two Best Of Cast.

A pair of songs—"Did You Ever Hear the Blues?" and "I'm A Good Old Girl," both sung by Claudia McNeil, stopped the show. Her "When I'm in a Quiet Mood" scored too. Miss McNeill is a good dead-pan comedienne who can belt out the blues a la Pearl Bailey.

But the overall singing of the large company was not as melodious as you'd expect from Negro performers — most of whom are born with a song in their heart. There was more yelling than singing last night.

The shapely Anna English was attractive as Zarita, the vamp. Strangely enough, though she's a Calypso singer, Anna didn't do so well with the vocals.

Warm Audience

Truth to report, the sentimental misunderstandings of Jess Simple and Joyce Lane, as written by Langston Hughes, do not make a play in the usual sense of the word. Nor is the direction by Josh Shelley much better. In addition, short scenes are shifted continuously from Simple's room to Joyce's room to Paddy's Bar in a manner most disconcerting.

Raymond Sovey did the sets. Music by David Martin was up and down. And the producers, for some reason, are not listed on the program.

Some evening I hope to see a play about Negroes, written and acted by Negroes, that presents them in a better light than heretofore. I would like to see a play, for a change, about a fine, decent Negro family of moderate means or even wealthy. A play in which the actors and actresses are not always poor, comic characters.

There are thousands of such fine decent families right in Harlem. There are Negro playwrights who can do them justice. There are talented Negro actors who can fill the roles more than adequately.

Such a happy, winning combination of playwright, play and actors simply did not come off last night in "Simply Heavenly."

New York Herald Tribune

August 21, 1957

'Simply Heavenly' in Move To Broadway's Playhouse

By Paul V. Beckley

"Simply Heavenly" moved down to Broadway last night and made the Playhouse on 48th St. a proof of its ability to project in any house its charm, gayety and earthiness as pungently as it did at the 85th Street Playhouse before regulations of one kind or another obliged it to close.

It picked up an eight-piece orchestra on the way with a trumpeter who has echoes of the old gut-bucket style, but this had no noticeable effect on what was already a seductive play, charged with life. For in spite of its two acts and seventeen scenes, giving structural semblance of a musical, the songs rise out of it so closely tied to the mood and matter of the people and the situation that they cannot be considered as aims in themselves. The stuff of this play is not there to provide an excuse for a melody but rather cries out for a song or a guitar bit from time to time.

Langston Hughes, the American poet who wrote this piece